Fantasy and Piety: An Interview with Ursula K. Le Guin

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Photo by Eileen Gunn

URSULA K. LE GUIN'S LIST OF CREDENTIALS would fill more pages than this interview itself. She began writing as a child, long before she became a Fulbright Fellow and went on to receive nine honorary degrees. Le Guin has published twenty-one novels, collections of short stories and volumes of poetry, children's books, works of translation, criticism, and more. Her work established her as a household name in the science fiction world several decades ago and has garnered a total of twelve Nebula and Hugo Awards, plus countless other awards. Her writing has had great crossover appeal although she is perhaps best known for her science fiction and fantasy, such as *The Left Hand of Darkness and Earthsea*.

Mere days after Ms. Le Guin's novel *Powers* had been nominated for the Nebula Award for Best Novel of 2008 (which it went on to win), we sat down for an informal discussion of her career, the connection between duty and peace, the creative process, the importance of speculative literature for women, and where she's headed now.

ROOM: The year this interview is published you'll be turning 80 years old—what do you feel are the most remarkable events or changes you've witnessed in women's socio-political evolution and in the development of speculative literature?

UKLG: Well, the situation of women is really much easier to talk about because the whole second women's revolution happened right in my adult lifetime and hit me as a writer early in my career and had an enormous influence on me, and, I think, has been one of the big things that happened in my lifetime. We have a long, long way to go, but at least things started moving again for women that had gotten stalled, just as with race relations. I mean, this year we had our first woman presidential candidate and our first black candidate, and it's kind of a damn shame we had to have them running against each other, but it has hap-

pened once, it'll happen again—barring catastrophe, which always throws people back into regimentation.

As for the whole subject of speculative fiction, science fiction, fantasy, I hardly know what to say. When I came into the field, it was a small genre. There were maybe sixty science fiction writers in the United States. The differences now are huge. Fantasy is an enormous industry instead of being barely mentioned stuff for kids. Science fiction is a fairly large industry, although I think it's kind of shrinking. Both of them have gone very commercial, and science fiction keeps having trouble establishing itself as literature, but fantasy has always been part of literature—although it was kind of disinherited by the modernist critics and forced into kiddie lit or genre.

And science fiction is perhaps kind of just blending in, in the postmodern world, with everything else. I think as a commercial genre, it may be kind of on the way out but that's just a guess. I just don't see very much happening, and it is so impossible now to keep ahead of technology. We've always been staggering along behind. Nobody in science fiction thought of the computer. You read old science fiction, you know, when he presses a button, and you think why doesn't he Google it? A couple of people had a dim idea there might have been something like an atomic bomb, before there was one, but I don't think anybody thought of the computer. So if it's science fiction, if it's techno-fiction, we can't get ahead of the game, we can't even keep up with it hardly. So that aspect of it has been changing, and I think what it does is it forces science fiction more and more over into either fantasy, which a lot of science fiction always was anyway, or techno-fiction—the wiring diagram kind of very hard science fiction that engineering students like to read—male engineering students.

ROOM: And do you think recent Pulitzer Prize winner Michael Chabon, who writes in science fiction as well as other genres, might play a role in bringing science fiction more to the forefront?

UKLG: That is exactly an example of what I meant, that it's all getting mixed up together. Michael just throws it all in the pot. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* is about Superman, the Holocaust, the Antarctic, you name it. It was a very hopeful sign that they gave him the Pulitzer for that, and that the critics realized that although *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* could be described as, what, a noir science fiction, a detective story, or something like that, it was a very fine novel.

ROOM: You've spent fifty years in the same house, eighty years on the same planet, and created countless worlds. What does "home" mean to you?

UKLG: Well, I guess there's three levels there. First, it means where I live in Portland, where I brought up my kids and so on. Moving down a little, it means a house in Berkeley and a house in the Napa Valley where I spent my childhood. And my childhood was just as rooted as my adulthood has been. I never went farther than fifty miles from Berkeley until I was seventeen. People can't believe that anybody could be so untravelled these days. But we just went up to the valley in the summer and came back to Berkeley in the winter. And my love for those places, for Northern California, is real, real deep in me. And I guess the third level, since you brought up the planet Earth, yeah, I'm very fond of this place.

ROOM: Do you feel that your rootedness has any correlation to your output? Does stability have any correlation to creativity?

UKLG: It does for me. It gives me time and room to write, a fixed space in which my imagination can just move out wherever it wants to. Whereas usually the only writing I do when I'm travelling is just a descriptive journal, because I'm busy describing the place where I am now. If I had to do that all the time I probably wouldn't write fiction.

ROOM: Why is writing and reading speculative literature important for women?

UKLG: Because it offers alternatives. What any group that is socially oppressed, or marginalized, or not in control, needs is to know that there are other ways to run a society, that the way this society is being run is not ordained by God from the beginning of time, that things can change. Which gives hope—any social movement of betterment has got to have some hope that things can be changed. And science fiction's really good at actually imagining other societies: How would they run? What are the costs and what are the benefits? And so on. You can actually do a dry run of what would it be like if … men and women were equal—or, like I did in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, what if basically there was no gender? Stuff like that. So you can do thought experiments which I think is a really important human activity.

ROOM: Especially when considering how to construct a society.

UKLG: Yeah, how to change anything—you gotta think it out some. You can't just go in and destroy it.

ROOM: You learned how to write as a woman in the middle of your life, and up until then, you wrote as a man. How would you describe the difference, and why do you feel it's important for women to learn to write as women? Is it more than just having a central male protagonist?

UKLG: Oh, yeah, it's way more. You know, this is so hard to talk about without sounding so very essentialist. You know, like "man is man, and woman is woman, and never the twain shall meet." But the fact is, you do write with your body as well as your mind. And if I was always writing through a male body I was at one remove from my reality. Does that make sense? I was distanced in a sense from my own experience. I was vicariously having a male experience. And it's a lot of fun, and I don't see why women shouldn't do it, or men shouldn't write as women at all. I'm not saying, "Write only your own sex," but the fact is if you aren't writing your own sex, you are not exploring a whole lot of your own experience.

When I was growing up, books were—they still are—mostly by and about men, and the male experience was central to the story. But then the women's movement comes along and says to women, "Well, it's not central to your story, Honey." But then I had to learn to rethink how I wrote, to put women at the centre. *The Tombs of Atuan* is the first book that had a woman at the centre. And she shares the central place with a man, which is a fair enough way to begin it. But the book where I changed is a not very well-known one, *The Eye of the Heron*. I started writing with a male hero, and he got himself killed, and there I am, I don't know, fifty pages into the book, saying, "Hey, you can't do that, you're my hero." And he said, "I'm sorry, this is what I do." So I'm left with the girl character, who I had not realized was central to the book.

And I realize, it sounds silly now, but I had to sit there and figure out that this book isn't about living, it's about losing. Oh—well whaddya know? And it was a big paradigm shift to realize that this girl had taken over the book and it was what she thought and what she did that were important to the book. And from then on, I had learned, "Okay, that's how you do it." Sounds very naïve but you know it's very hard to talk about art processes.

ROOM: You once said that you were a writer, it was a gift that you had, and you were going to put it to the best use you could. Recently I heard Elizabeth

Gilbert discuss creativity and how, historically, a "genius" was seen as something separate from the artist, as a kind of spirit that would flow through the artist. Is that how you see your gift? Is it something that influences you, or that you influence, or both?

UKLG: It controls me more than I control it, and I think that's why people personify it sometimes as a muse or something that you have to court, or make room for, or pray to. In that sense, it's like a spirit that is not just your indwelling life spirit, it's something that comes into you. Every people has that idea—the Welsh call it the *Awen*, the wind that blows through you, and you are the voice of that wind. It's inspiration, it's prophecy, and it's storytelling. But if that's your profession, if what you do your whole life is tell stories, or write poetry, it's pretty intimately a part of you too. But it comes, it goes, you know. If at the moment I just don't seem to have a novel to write, well that's just how it is. I can't make myself have a novel to write until the novel comes to me.

ROOM: And do you switch off to poetry when you don't have a novel to work on? What does poetry fulfill in you that fiction doesn't?

UKLG: I wrote poetry before I wrote prose, as a child, and I've written it all my life. And for the last eight or ten years I've been in a group of working poets which has been a real joy. And really brought me up to the mark technically, which I was kind of sloppy about before. But you know, getting a poem to write, that's terrific! Then you have to work on it. Some you can work and work and work and they never come right, but when they come right it's a tremendous pleasure, and it's, again, you have to call it a gift. And you're lucky if you can accept the gift.

ROOM: What do you look forward to learning next, now that you have chipped away at Latin?

UKLG: I don't know. I've got to get my Latin better. I'm reading the *Aeneid* for the second time and it's going a lot faster than it did the first time but my Latin is still pretty lame. I like learning languages, but I don't know. There are several problems with getting into your high seventies, and one of them is energy. Your energy store just gets smaller and smaller, so everything you do takes longer so you can do less in a day. It just is a fact, and you have to just accept it. Large projects such as learning a whole new language or something—I could only do that if I

fell in love, the way I fell in love with Gabriela Mistral [*Selected Poems of Gabriela Mistral* is Le Guin's translation of the work of Gabriela Mistral, winner of the 1945 Nobel Prize in Literature, the first Latin American to win it]. Well, I was already kind of in love with the Spanish language and you know, to translate—I love translating, I have done a fair amount of it. That's really what I'm looking for at the moment is a translation project. But I have to fall in love with the person I'm translating, so I can absolutely give my heart to the text that I'm working on, because otherwise it's just a job.

ROOM: You've said that *Lavinia* is an antiwar story. There is much about Lavinia's life that revolves around duty and piety. What do you feel is the connection between piety or duty and peace?

UKLG: I don't know. That's a very interesting question. Duty and piety—these were enormously important words to the Romans and to Vergil. Aeneas is called "pious". Well, "pious" has become such a crummy word, you know. So what did they mean? What did Vergil mean when he said that? Because Aeneas as I experienced him in the epic is a very cool guy, a really good leader who listens to his people and adapts his plans. If the women are unhappy, he changes his plans. He is very human, he makes a big major mistake with Dido, he does not seem enthusiastic at all about fighting. So what I call the pacifist aspect of my book is a reflection of what I think is really there in Vergil.

I think Homer just loved the battles in the *Iliad*, and I don't think Vergil loves the battles in the *Aeneid*, and that's the reason why those battles are much more shocking and awful than the Homeric ones. The battle scenes are shocking and disgusting. And Vergil knew that. Vergil was an incredibly sensitive man, with incredible sensitivity to human pain and suffering and vulnerability. That's why everybody who reads Vergil tends to love him and how could you not? He's such a sympathetic guy. He's telling Augustus, "Okay, this is how you got your crown but this was the cost you paid and don't forget it." It seems to me that's what he's saying. Other scholars might totally disagree with that interpretation, but that's what I got out of it, and that's one reason the book *Lavinia* began growing in me. I wanted to say that again, for Vergil, in our time. Because the *Aeneid* seemed so relevant to me.

ROOM: Considering this idea of duty, what do you feel is the duty of the writer or artist to her society?

UKLG: To do the work well. To work as well as you can do. Never to cut corners, never to sell out. If you are given a gift of making anything, I just feel thoroughly convinced, irrationally, that your job is to do it well, as well as you can. You know of course that you won't do it perfectly, but that's the cost of the gift. You take the gift and you use it as well as you can. And I do think artists' relationship to their society is very complicated, and it can be very subversive and revolutionary, but I don't think it includes the right to be harmful or hurtful for the sake of shock or doing harm.

ROOM: This issue of speculative literature will introduce many of our readers to the speculative world for the first time. Do you have any words of initiation for them?

UKLG: If you think it's all spaceships or something, forget it! Most literature up until about 1750 was fantastic literature. Fantasy is probably our oldest mode of storytelling. You certainly, I hope, wouldn't give your kids only books about how the tractor works, or something. You would allow them to read something about winged horses or something like that. Don't be afraid of fantasy or even science fiction. And don't assume that it has no literary value. It might just blow you away.